



Creating an Exhibit

#2- Labels & Design

Good labels and design provide content, context, and help guide the visitor to where you want them to go (physically & intellectually). Poor labels and presentation can severely hinder your objectives for the exhibit. Universal Design guidelines/standards should be used as much as possible to ensure accessibility for all visitors.

Exhibit Labels

Labels are the content of your exhibit. Figuring out how best to present the information you want is not necessarily easy. Note also that labels for historical exhibits can be very different than labels for art exhibits.

- Labels tell a story, they should include action and go beyond simply describing an object. They should make sense from wherever someone reads it in the exhibit (not everyone will read them in “order.”) Labels will have a point of view- make sure you know what it is and that it’s what you want.
- Main types of labels:
 - *Title*: Title of exhibit. Usually large, one sentence. Good titles arouse interest/curiosity while also describing what exhibit is about.
 - *Group/Section Labels*: Medium-sized, can be larger blocks of text. These labels tie a group of items together to tell a broader story. May include images.
 - *Caption/Object Labels*: Small, for one object or a small group of objects only. These are the labels most likely to be read. Should be descriptive and active, and about 150 words or less.
- Be consistent with label typeface, size and color, and placement. You can delineate different types of labels/information by varying these. Be aware of accessibility and readability parameters (typeface size, label location, color). **BIGGER THINGS** will always get read more than smaller things.
- Readability is key. Don’t use overly complex or technical language or assume extensive prior knowledge of the topic or object. Effective labels use active voice to get the message across quickly and succinctly.
- Labels can also be interactive by providing visitors with something “to do”: agree/disagree with statement, make conclusions, ask questions, make comparisons, make discoveries, etc. but limit labels that ask direct questions.
- When creating labels, start with what visitors can see/experience directly and expand from there. Vary the amount and type of information (including text length) included on labels to reduce visitor boredom.

Activity: Pick an object and write 3 different versions of a label for it, varying one type of component only (voice/vocab, font, story, layout, etc.) Have someone from outside your organization read the labels & evaluate their responses.

To Do: Choose a standard font for your exhibit object labels. Experiment with legibility of the font at different sizes to help determine minimums at various distances. See here for some accessible font options: <https://accessibility.uncg.edu/make-content-accessible/design-elements/>

Exhibit Design & Layout

The way you layout and design your exhibit can have as much if not more impact on visitors as the content. Design doesn't have to be "flashy" to be good.

- Think about visitor flow through the exhibit. Where are people most likely to stop in the exhibit? Try to plan space around anticipated bottlenecks. Remember, not everyone will walk through the exhibit in the same order. Use wayfinding or explanatory text if you want visitors to view an exhibit in a certain way.
- Try to keep your exhibit accessible to most patrons. That means having enough space for visitors to walk/turn around within the space, not placing items too high or too low, and having items at the proper angle. See resources below on accessible design guidelines for specifics.
- Focus information and layer content so that all visitors can get essential information while others can go deeper into a topic of interest. Think about what you want a visitor to take away after only spending 1-5 minutes at your exhibit.
- There are many options these days for designing and printing exhibit content. When deciding what materials or processes to use think about the length of time the exhibit will be up, costs, and overall atmosphere you are trying to create.

Activity: Using a floor plan of your exhibit space, experiment with 2-3 different layouts for exhibit components.

To Do: Use a visitor behavior mapping tool to track how people go through your exhibit. Look at gathering data on things like flow/viewing patterns, areas where the most or least time is spent, and places of confusion.

Additional Resources

[Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design](#)

[Inclusive and Accessible Design Guidelines](#) from the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

[How to Build a Museum Exhibit in One Hour](#) by the Morrison County Historical Society

[Exhibit Panel Design Basics](#) by the BC Museums Association

Elizabeth Bogle, *Museum Exhibition Planning and Design* (AltaMira Press 2013)

Alice Parman and Jeffrey Jane Flowers, *Exhibit Makeovers: Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums* (AltaMira Press, 2008)

Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, 2nd ed.* (AltaMira Press, 2015)